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ABSTRACT

While most school systems have programs for gifted and special-education students, little attention is paid to the many students in between. Because the majority of students do not receive the special attention offered at the extremes of education, there is a danger that their needs are not being met. Most in the educational community agree that these students in the middle can perform better. Several factors contribute to the low achievement of many average students: low expectations, inappropriate testing, passive learning, lack of motivation, overextended schools and overextended teachers, among others. Strategies to engage students include active learning, heightened expectations, and motivation building. In addition, teachers' needs must be addressed to improve education for average students. Teachers need to be included in reform efforts and, most importantly, to receive training to help them inspire and engage students as well as maintain and improve their own teaching skills. Parents must also become involved in education, not only by providing a supportive and learning environment at home, but by becoming involved in schools. Lastly, testing must be made a more useful learning tool. A list of 10 references and 4 resources are included. (JPT)

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CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

How to unleash the potential of average students

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FOREWORD

Like a chorus, people from all walks of life are calling for higher levels of student achievement. Many educators are leading the charge, joined by parents, business people, governors, and even the President of the United States. A panoply of programs has been developed to help schools deal with students who are at risk of school failure. Though inadequately funded, some federal programs focus successfully on the needs of the disadvantaged. Most school systems have elaborate programs to meet the needs of the gifted and talented and those who qualify for special education. In fact, the Education for All Handicapped Act requires individual education plans (IEPs) for each special education student.

Yet there is another group of students, indeed the majority, who qualify for neither the gifted program nor special education for the handicapped. They are the students in the middle, those who are sometimes called "average." When educators visit, their conversations often turn to a concern about those students who "fall through the cracks." They talk of the need for "safety nets" and are alarmed that existing nets are full of holes. Most agree that students in the middle are capable of improved, even great performance.

How can we help these students reach their potentials, increase their chances in life and, as a result, raise achievement scores? That's what this booklet is about. Every teacher, administrator, board member, parent, and business or community leader should read this publication and discuss what it has to say. Then, plans should be developed that will lead to even better performance by students in the middle. Our future and the future of our nation is directly linked to theirs.

— Richard D. Miller, Executive Director
American Association of School Administrators

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WHO ARE THE KIDS IN THE MIDDLE?

The sixth-grade class is restless as Mrs. Johnson explains the math problem requiring students to determine the commission on a boy's paper route. Marie yawns, thinking to herself, "This must be the tenth time she's explained a percentage problem!"

As Mrs. Johnson pauses to answer a students' question, David, who sits near the door, drums his fingers idly on his desk, mentally calculating how many class days have been spent on the same kind of problem. Math used to be his favorite subject, but now he glances at the clock, waiting for class to end.

Marie and David are typical of many students in classrooms across the nation. They are the "kids in the middle"—caught somewhere between special programs for the gifted and the handicapped, but qualifying for neither. Sometimes we call them the "kids who fall through the cracks." There are not enough time or resources to give them special attention. These are our "average students" who are not challenged in school. Instead, they "mark time," doing the bare minimum required in class because they are not engaged by classroom discussions or assignments.

Ordinarily, the problem is met with quiet discontent. On rare occasions, parents may ask profound questions about their average students' lot. Often this occurs during a PTA meeting or budget hearing when they see funds allo-

cated for the gifted and talented or for special education, and are propelled to ask: "When will there be a special program for my child? I don't see the teachers meeting his* needs."

Unfulfilled potential.

How well are America's schools meeting the needs of the students in the middle—in essence, the majority of students? Reports abound that too many students fail to comprehend what they read. They cannot construct a good sentence or identify neighboring nations on a map. Such standardized tests as the National Assessment of Educational Progress—known as "The Nation's Report Card"—show serious gaps in the knowledge and skills of typical American students within the U.S. and with their counterparts in other countries. Unfortunately, many students are not even approaching their potential, and most everyone agrees something must be done about it soon.

Not living up to one's potential is not only an individual tragedy. Our nation's future, in fact the future of every community, depends on an educated people. With education, people are better citizens and more employable, in addition to leading more personally fulfilling lives. A nation that deprives its people of the very best education inhibits its own potential.

No children to waste.

It is no secret that our nation will need every citizen to be productive if it is to continue to be competitive in the international marketplace. In the mid-1990s, only 3 Americans will be working for every person on Social Security, compared with 17 workers in the early 1950s. And given advances in technology, few of those students who drop out of school today, or who are not well-educated, will be productive tomorrow.

That is why this publication focuses on the "average" student—many of whom end up dropping out of school. We explore the possible sources of the problem—why average students are sometimes overlooked and not engaged in learning. And we examine a variety of solutions that are being tried around the country.

This book is for teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, citizens, and prospective employers. In short, it is for all who are concerned about the ability of average students to fulfill their potential, both in school and in preparation for successful adulthood.

*Because we believe in the importance of individuals, we often use the singular pronoun. To be fair, we alternate the use of "his" and "her" throughout this publication.

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WHAT KEEPS STUDENTS FROM SUCCEEDING?

What are the reasons for low achievement among students in the middle? They are not difficult to find. In fact, the causes are many and are often interrelated. Experts, practitioners, and parents are among the first to cite reasons some students aren't performing to their potential, including:

- Low expectations
- Passive learning
- Lack of motivation
- Overextended schools
- Tracking and ability grouping
- Inappropriate testing
- Lack of staff development
- Peer pressure
- Overextended teachers.

Low expectations.

Some students have traditionally performed poorly in class or on tests. As a result, some teachers expect and require less of them. Teachers, for example, might assign less homework because certain students aren't getting it done anyway...or are not getting it done on time. Alarmingly, some teachers automatically assume that students from certain social, economic, or ethnic groups are incapable of handling demanding work. Some studies have even concluded that certain teachers expect higher performance from young girls than from young boys because of differences in maturity factors.

When teachers categorize children, or are too quick to diagnose their learning capabilities, they short-change them. They end up offering these children a watered-down curriculum and less intense—and less motivating—instruction. It's when teachers operate from a belief that all students can learn, and maintain high expectations for all of them, that the majority of students will learn to their potential.

"When I was in the eighth grade, I had a teacher who was a real bear about grammar. All the kids hated her. But as my career as a writer has grown, I realize that she is one of about three teachers who gave me something of real value that I use on a daily basis."

—Author Yvonne Ewegen

Tracking and ability grouping.

The time-honored traditions of assigning students to tracks or to ability groups were begun with the best of intentions: to help gear the teaching specifically to the students' needs. Today, these practices are under attack for the perceived impact they have on performance. Those who oppose tracking and ability grouping typically point out that:

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- The labels students inevitably acquire, either from their teachers or their peers, become self-fulfilling prophecies. As one leading educator noted, "The bluebirds and the buzzards both know who they are. Put students in a low-end reading group, for example, and they will very likely see themselves as less capable than others in the class...and they will stay less capable."
- Assignments to low, medium, or high groups within a classroom tend to become permanent. "A problem we face is that, once assigned, we keep kids in certain groups or tracks," a veteran teacher exclaimed. "We stereotype...and the kids adopt our lower opinions of their abilities and perform accordingly."
- Remedial classes tend to move more slowly through the material than do the regular classes, causing the students to fall farther behind their peers.
- Tracks become intellectual prisons. When a student is placed in a lower track over an extended period, he might spend more time on drill and practice but fall behind the rest of the class, making actual class time even less interesting and even confusing. That, plus the low self-esteem that can result from an overuse of these techniques, can be devastating.

Student motivation.

For all ages of students, motivation is a critical factor in school performance. No matter how supportive the parents or how dedicated the teacher, without the cooperation of the student, learning cannot occur. Motivation affects:

- How well the student pays attention in class.
- How much effort she puts into assignments.
- The importance she attaches to doing well and to learning the material.

Motivation, of course, is affected by events outside the classroom. One strong motivator is the importance parents place on education and whether they communicate this to the child. Parents demonstrate their support when they establish ground rules for homework and provide the necessary help to ensure homework is completed.

Motivation is also affected by peer group values and the student's interests outside school. But equally powerful are the student's and teacher's expectations and the efforts both bring to class. The movie, "Stand and Deliver," which portrays the true story of spectacular achievement by inner-city Hispanic youth, eloquently demonstrates the effect hard work and high expectations can play on the most "at-risk" students.

Peer pressure.

A person's peer group can have a profound effect on what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Obviously, some students tie into peer groups where achievement is highly valued. They support and help each other.

Others, however, are caught up in peer groups where achievement is disdained. Some are even harassed by their peers for working too hard and setting an example that others don't want to work hard enough to achieve.

In accepting an "All USA Academic Award" from USA Today, one high-achieving student said, "Because I've worked hard in school and have gotten good grades, a lot of other students have seen me as a little bit weird. Finally, someone has said that trying to achieve is okay."

"Sometimes I see students come to school intentionally unmotivated, adds Dave Mittleholtz of San Diego's Achievement Goals Program. "They get greater respect from peers if they absolutely can show no motivation in the classroom."

Inappropriate testing.

How we go about testing and assessing students, and using the results, is fraught with hazards for students. Making school placement decisions based on tests is one unfortunate example. Many teachers lack sufficient training in how to administer and interpret external tests. As a result, students may be assigned inappropriately to remedial or special education programs when normal maturation would have solved the perceived problem. For example, standardized tests for kindergarten and first-grade students often measure such things as general maturity and fine motor coordination, which are unrelated to cognitive ability. National education consultant Faith Hamre notes that the standard error of measure on standardized tests for kindergarten and first grade can vary by as much as two years. She urges not using standardized tests with students until second grade.

Another problem is that national standardized tests usually focus on short-answer and multiple choice questions. Giving undue emphasis to these tests and their results undermines important efforts to teach and assess students' higher-order thinking skills.

While most agree that criterion-referenced and teacher-made tests provide the best information for helping individual students improve their learning, they too can be inappropriately used. How teachers use the Bell Curve is a good example. Today still, some teachers have pangs of guilt unless their students can be neatly distributed along the Curve. Often, a teacher will even announce in advance that there will be a certain number of As and Fs in the class. As Thomas Kelly, manager of the Effective Schools Consortia Network in New York, explained, "In semesters past, I would feel guilty—as if I had done something wrong—when most of my students earned an A."

The Bell Curve was designed for use by researchers working with large, random, untreated groups. It was not meant to pit the knowledge and skills of individual students against one another. Now, says Kelly, "Once in my class...you are part of a small selected, treated group."

Passive learning.

Although virtually everyone agrees that people learn best by doing, we know that large proportions of classroom time are spent with teachers talking and students listening. While teachers must spend some time introducing new material, the most effective classrooms employ a combination of

strategies that quickly move students from hearing new information to exploring and applying that information in individual and to small group settings.

Lack of staff development.

A good number of teachers have not had the opportunity to learn and apply what research has shown about different learning styles of children and effective teaching techniques. Even where teachers have been exposed to such concepts, structures should be in place, such as mentor teachers and training for principals, so that teachers are encouraged to try new techniques and to refine them in the classroom.

Overextended teachers.

Teachers of all grades must deal with a range of student abilities, complicated by cultural diversity and social problems. In some schools, elementary teachers must cope with high turnover as parents move as soon as the next rent check is due. Divorce, unemployment, and other problems can affect both a child's performance in the classroom and the parents' ability to communicate with and support what the teacher is trying to achieve.

Heavy class loads are another factor that can influence the education of students in the middle. With the number of students each teacher has pushing upwards to 200, it becomes very difficult to individualize instruction. Teachers are more likely to give writing assignments less frequently because of the time required to grade large numbers of papers. A heavy load also makes it difficult for teachers to know each student personally: What are his strengths and weaknesses? What factors outside the classroom—such as divorcing parents—might be affecting his performance?

"In my second year of teaching, I had 204 students," says Theodore Sizer, a major education reformer whose Coalition of Essential Schools organizes classes around a maximum of 80 students. "I didn't know them as kids," Sizer says. "I simply knew them as history or English students...and I served them very poorly."

Overextended schools.

It is a common complaint that society wants schools to cure all its social ills. Sessions to help students reject drugs and premature sex compete for time in the class day with math and science. It is unlikely that schools will soon drop their efforts to teach responsible decision making and otherwise meet students' personal needs. For many students, school is the only place they will have these needs met. Some schools, however, are addressing the growing demands on school time by narrowing the curriculum in whatever ways possible, in an effort to teach students the few, most important things well.

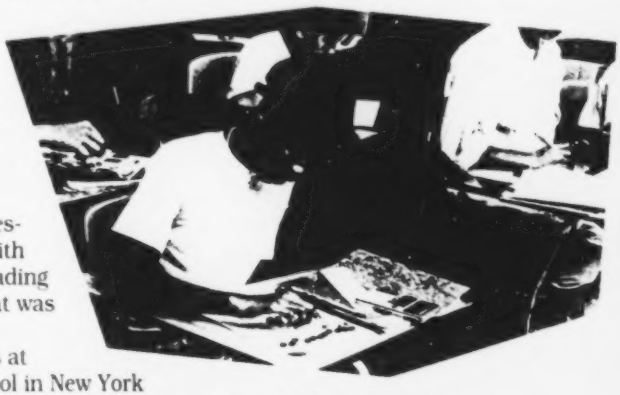
There is no single "right way" to help students in the middle. In fact, there are likely as many ways as there are students. In this publication, however, we will try to provide a range of possible examples.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

The students walk purposefully into the classroom, glancing at the board for instructions, then moving either to a couch in the corner or to a rectangle of desks in the middle of the room.

On the board near the couch, humanities teacher Michael Goldman has written a series of questions about latitude, longitude, and hemispheres. A 12-year-old seventh-grader begins leading a discussion, modeling a technique Goldman demonstrated earlier in the year. "What is the purpose of latitude and longitude?" the student asks.

As the discussion proceeds, the leader notices one student who has not said anything. Seeing that the student is having trouble, she works with him individually until he can answer the question in his own words. When a consensus is reached on the purpose of these map terms, the leader summarizes the conclusion, which is jotted down by another student who has been designated as note-taker. Meanwhile, Goldman circulates among those students at desks, coaching them as they write paragraphs in response to specific questions. The class ends with still another student leading a discussion about what was learned that day.



Goldman's students at Central Park East School in New York City illustrate how some classrooms operate when the focus is student-as-worker. This school is one of 78 members of the Coalition of Essential Schools that are making large-scale changes in the way schools are organized and students learn. The coalition and other schools are part of a wider reform movement to improve education. Some focus on school-based management, based on the theory that education decisions are best left to those closest to the students—the teachers, parents, the principal...and even the student himself. Others have taken research on successful schools and crafted a district- or area-wide approach to raising achievement, using techniques to increase time-on-task and provide immediate feedback in a structured approach that improves student success. Still others have reached back to the time of Socrates to find strategies that successfully engage students in using their minds and participating in lively discussions.

From these successful schools can be distilled a series of strategies, some common and some unique. The strategies fall within three major categories:

- Engaging students through active learning.
- Raising expectations.
- Motivating students.

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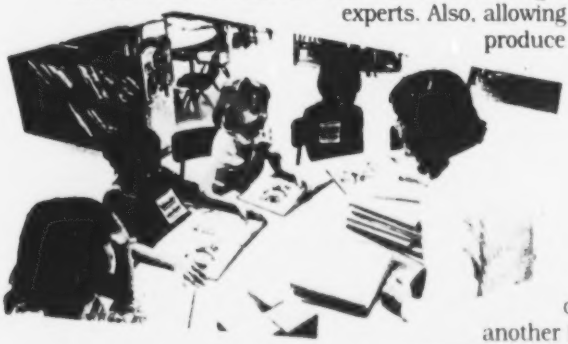
Active Learning

"All genuine learning is active, not passive," writes Mortimer Adler in *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto.* "It is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher." In various reforms, active learning takes place under different names, but the process is similar: The teacher presents new information, then devotes the bulk of class time to providing students structured opportunities to practice the skill or apply the new knowledge in new situations, as the following strategies illustrate.

Cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning has been found to be an effective way to increase student achievement, but only when there are clearly stated group goals and individual accountability. Simply placing students in groups, providing some interesting materials or problems to solve, and allowing free discovery of information is not an effective alternative, according to R.E. Slavin and other experts. Also, allowing groups to work together to produce a single product or solution appears to be equally ineffective.



Basically, with the teacher's instruction and oversight, students work together in groups of two to six to meet a common instructional goal. The idea is that students are dependent on one another for success; they are all responsible not only for learning the instructional material, but for ensuring that their teammates learn it as well.

Noting the benefits of this approach, Dave Mittleholtz of the San Diego Unified Schools, said: "In classes of 30 to 40 students, few get the chance to contribute orally to the whole class....But within groups, all have a chance to listen and speak and give feedback." The process differs from ability grouping by placing together students of varying abilities. Also, while some groups may change day-to-day as assignments are completed, it is believed that students benefit most when they can stay together for several weeks or more. "They are more able to develop a sense of teamwork and team membership," explains Katherine Sacca, an expert in cooperative learning.

Coaching.

One clever motto urges teachers to: "Be the guide by the side, not the sage on the stage." Teachers coach spontaneously when they work individually with a student on a particular problem. To have a more active classroom, both teachers and students can make coaching a regular and frequent event.

Coaching is a flexible art form that can be applied to a variety of group

sizes and situations. It typically occurs with a pair of students or a group of three to five; but it can involve the whole class, such as when a teacher leads a structured brainstorming session, notes Patricia Weiss, former acting director of the National Paideia Center. In gym class, for example, the teacher may demonstrate the proper grip on a tennis racket and then circulate, coaching by giving each student feedback and making adjustments where necessary. In a small group, a peer may coach by helping a student who is reading by supplying the difficult word.

Technology.

Coaching can also occur when students work with computers. The computer program itself may coach, by providing immediate feedback and tailoring the next exercise to the student's current performance. The teacher, who is temporarily freed from presenting information to the entire group, coaches by rotating among the students, providing suggestions and helping with problems.

The computer, used correctly, can make true individualization possible, lifting the restrictions imposed by grade structure and teacher-initiated instruction. Students don't have to "catch up" with their class, nor do they have to wait until others catch up with them before they can advance. This is good news for students in the middle, for whom the catch-up game is a major stumbling block to motivation and achievement. In *Real Restructuring Through Technology*, Eileen M. Ahearn notes that, with the proper use of technology, "current difficult problems such as tracking, grade placement, and special treatment for the gifted and talented will disappear as issues in schools."

It's important to note, too, that schools that use computers effectively teach students to use them as a tool in problem solving. For example, in a number of secondary schools, students are using modems to connect their computers across telephone lines with the computers of other students, professional scientists, the school library, the electronic card catalog at the local library, and even the U.S. Library of Congress. Students can work by themselves or in pairs or small groups to research a problem and review unsuccessful solutions. Then they can develop hypotheses for new solutions and devise simulations to test their hypotheses. Using existing technologies such as the computer, the modem, major databases, and electronic bulletin boards, these students are able to form the habit of accessing information and analyzing and using it to solve on a day-to-day basis the kinds of problems they will face personally and professionally all their lives.

Socratic questioning.

While coaching is intended to help students apply skills, the Socratic seminar is a discussion whose purpose is to give students an enlarged understanding of ideas and values. In the Paideia Program, students and teachers are equals as they explore profound human themes in literature and art.

How does Socratic questioning benefit the kids in the middle? "The (Socratic) seminar is one of the few times that students come together where the playing field is level," explains Weiss. Instead of focusing on facts, which are memory-based and favor a certain type of learner, the seminars ask wide-open questions related to conceptual understanding. A seminar on a novel might ask, in response to an opinion, "Where in the text do you find evidence to support that?"

"There's an interesting blend that works with varying abilities," Weiss adds. "It's not like one is teaching the other; they all come out gaining." Such sessions can be so compelling that students who dropped out of one Chicago high school asked their principal if they could come back for the seminars. And these sessions are not limited to English class. One physics teacher conducted a seminar on pendulums, asking the students: "What do you see? Why is that happening?"

Reciprocal teaching.

Students and teachers take turns in the teaching role in this small group technique, developed by the University of Michigan based on strategies used by good readers. In a dialogue, students use four strategies to understand a section of text:

- ***Summarizing***–identifies and integrates the most important information in the text.
- ***Questioning***–reinforces the summarizing, taking students one step further in comprehension by encouraging them to ask "teacher-like" questions.
- ***Clarifying***–helps the student understand unfamiliar or difficult words, phrases, and concepts.
- ***Predicting***–has students hypothesize what the author will discuss next in the text. It gives students a purpose for reading, to see if their prediction was correct.

One educator explained the benefits of this approach in this way: "When students take turns being the teacher in a small group, making summarizing statements and seeing if anybody else has better ones, learning comes alive. The students get to play a much bigger role in their own education."

No matter what form it takes, active learning is seen as a crucial part of improving the schools' response to the student in the middle.

Raising Expectations

Students tend to live up or down to the expectations of others—particularly the expectations of teachers and parents. In fact, a number of education reformers see an upgrade in expectations as key to transforming schools. In addition to examining educators' attitudes about individual students, there are practical, structural steps teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards can take to increase expectations of and for all students.

Personalize.

Students in the middle are much less likely to drift unchallenged in a school organization where teachers have the opportunity to get to know them as individuals. The middle schools approach fosters personalization by organizing students in teams who share the same teachers for core subjects. Those teachers share a common planning period where discussions can focus on students, rather than on the subjects they teach.

Some schools expand this approach by assigning two subjects to each teacher. The teacher then sees fewer students twice a day in different settings. There are two advantages to this approach: With fewer students, teachers are more comfortable assigning written work. Written work helps to build thinking skills, especially when students are required to analyze what they have learned. The smaller teaching load also gives teachers an opportunity to know individual students better. To cover the costs related to reducing class size, it might be necessary to reorder educational priorities or seek community support.

Support mentoring.

Pairing students with a teacher-mentor is another way to personalize education. Through Direction 2000, an education reform adopted by Littleton High School, south of Denver, each certified staff member will be paired with four students per year, up to a maximum of 16, in an Educational Advisement Program. The adviser will meet weekly with the students through their four years of high school and reserve one hour per week to meet in depth with one of the four, says Brian Linkhart, a science teacher who helped develop the plan.

"Our goal is to have one adult who knows each student intimately well," Linkhart explains. Once each semester, beginning in the spring of the student's eighth-grade year, the adviser, student, and parent will meet to discuss the student's educational goals and develop a plan to meet those goals.

Direction 2000 grew out of "a frustration that students were showing less motivation and greater acceptance of failure," says Linkhart. "We decided it was because students didn't have an active role in their learning." One purpose of the Educational Advisement Program is "to put students in charge of their education, so they will feel greater responsibility and ownership for their learning."

What are teachers in this school giving up to make time for advisement? Hall duty. In the past, teachers used one hour of lunch or a planning period

per week to monitor the halls. School staff will recruit high school seniors or adult volunteers to monitor the halls.

"Kids need some transition help from middle school to high school. Teachers are too departmentalized: they need to become integrated and share ideas."

—David Bennet, student

Ensure a non-threatening tone.

One of the Coalition of Essential Schools' guiding principles stresses "unanxious expectation," which is explained as, "I won't threaten you, but I expect much of you." The tone also reflects trust, until abused, and treating students with fairness and generosity. Such attitudes build a feeling of camaraderie that can motivate students to try harder.

Before enrolling in Hope Essential High School in Providence, Rhode Island, Adam Fishman says he didn't apply himself because, "I don't like to be told what to do." Although Hope teachers also give assignments, the difference is, "They treat you with respect and we give them respect. We talk on the same wavelength."

Instill intellectual rigor.

Expectations are raised for all students when the focus is on developing an in-depth understanding of events and ideas, rather than on learning dates and facts. "Kids are not getting thinking skills," says parent Yvonne Ewegen. "I want them to learn HOW to think, not WHAT to think."

Effective teaching strategies, such as seminars, coaching, and the use of computers, are one part of the solution, but changes in the curriculum are also needed. According to many reformers, schools have tried to satisfy so many requirements that they cannot serve any of them well.

Focus the curriculum.

The solution is to focus on the most important skills and concepts. Faculties of "essential schools" band together to determine what key skills and knowledge their students should know. Similarly, Paideia schools are encouraged to focus on limited areas of organized knowledge, such as language, science and history, and specific intellectual skills, including reading, writing, problem solving, estimating, and exercising critical judgment. Many schools are reaching out to their communities, including members of the business community, to help determine curricular priorities.

Eliminate remedial classes.

In an effort to break the trap of low expectations that comes with tracking, the San Diego schools are eliminating all remedial classes. The first step was to define a core curriculum that raised expectations for all students. New texts being adopted deal with thinking skills and students are "doing a lot more writing and not as much drill and practice," said Frank Till, assistant superintendent. Elementary schools are incorporating a whole language approach that combines reading, writing, and speaking skills on topics geared

to students' interests. At all levels, there is an effort to use original sources for literature, "making sure we don't 'dummy down' the books," Till says.

At the secondary level, resource teachers provide a "safety net" to those who would fall behind. At the beginning of a unit, all students receive the same instruction in class. Those who do not understand are first retaught in the classroom in small groups. After one, two or three days, depending on the lesson, teachers are required to move on to the next lesson. Students who still haven't mastered the information meet with the basic skills resource teacher before or after school, during an elective or for lunch. Tutoring, the opportunity to get some additional help from a teacher or other adult or another student, is a very effective way to keep students from falling through the cracks.

San Diego proves all can learn

The Achievement Goals Program (AGP) in San Diego has attained spectacular increases in achievement scores in low-performing, heavily minority schools. In just three years, student math scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) rose from one-fourth of the K-through-12 students scoring above the national norm at each grade level in the AGP schools to from one-half to two-thirds scoring above the norm. The AGP schools use a highly structured curriculum, developed by teachers, that is based on the premise that all children can learn.

Offer additional learning opportunities.

Thayer High School in rural Winchester, New Hampshire, for example, requires the eighth-graders to give exhibitions to demonstrate their readiness for high school. When 18 of the 50 did not meet the standard, the school offered a summer school course, which enabled 16 of the 18 to meet the standard. "The effort is to get the playing field as level as possible," says Ted Sizer. "The attitude is not remediation, but acceleration."

Assume all children can learn.

Instead of focusing on disadvantages that come with students' backgrounds, effective teachers concentrate on what can be changed in the classroom. Teachers succeed when they vary the techniques used, giving students with different learning styles opportunities to learn with their ears, eyes, movement, and touch. Not all students will learn the information or technique the first time it is presented. Research has demonstrated, however, that the vast majority of students can learn when the objective is held constant but the time and approach are varied.

The University of Chicago's Benjamin Bloom concluded that any student can master a body of knowledge, given enough time. The fact is, some take

longer than others to learn certain things. In teaching for mastery, the growing number of out-come based education advocates generally call for pretesting to determine what students already know. They start at that point teaching the student, and then post-test to be sure the lessons have been learned. Rather than simply moving on to the next topic, the teacher makes sure individual students have mastered the lesson.

4 Keys To Success

San Diego's successful program is built on four research cornerstones:

- ***Time on task.*** Allocate sufficient learning time; provide lessons that engage students and allow for a high rate of success; and give continuous academic feedback.
- ***Mastery learning.*** Hold achievement constant and vary instructional time; set specific sequential objectives; provide about 10 days for instruction of each unit; test pupils for mastery; reteach students not attaining mastery and enrich others; proceed to new unit when 80 percent attain mastery.
- ***Reduce classroom distractions.*** Organize the classroom schedule for maximum instructional time; design effective activity centers; organize classroom instructional materials; use coping strategies that consume minimal time and prevent recurrence of distractions.
- ***Direct instruction.*** Use detailed lessons to reach specific objectives; emphasize group and individual oral responses; control content with year-long pacing; test and reteach; and monitor objectives, lessons taught, teaching strategies, and pupil achievement.

The Achievement Goals Program grew out of a court-ordered desegregation program that sought to improve instruction in about one-fifth of San Diego's schools, where 70 percent or more of the students were scoring below the 50th percentile. Key reasons for the program's success, says Mittleholtz, are that the AGP "tightened the coupling" between curriculum and instructional practice—what was really being given to all students every year. "Some teachers traditionally teach addition and subtraction until everyone really gets it," Mittleholtz comments. "By May, we haven't gotten to measurement or decimals."

By pulling the low-performing schools into a team, the district was able to give greater central office support to ensure that teachers covered the content by following a recommended pacing of the material. "Our goal is to keep 80 percent of the students performing on 80 percent of the objectives," Mittleholtz concludes.

Call on resource people.

Often schools invite business or professional people to speak to classes. These resource people can show the connection between what students are learning in school and how they can use it later in life to make a living or just live a more interesting life. Of course, resource people can include older citizens who talk about "living history" or travelers who describe various parts of the world, among others.

Motivating Students

Human beings are motivated to work hard for various reasons. Some motivation is extrinsic, or externally imposed; some is intrinsic, springing from an inner desire to learn or to excel. In schools, grades are the most obvious extrinsic motivators. Experts caution that teachers and parents should not overlook either extrinsic or intrinsic motivators. Long-term, however, it is the intrinsic motivators that will be most effective as students grow older.

"We got a call that there had been a break-in at our high school. When the police arrived, they found a student working on a computer. He'd broken in so he could use it. Things weren't going very well for him at home or at school, but that computer, to him, was a real motivator."

—A Texas school superintendent

12 ways to motivate students.

Classroom research and the success of good teachers has yielded many practical tips on the most effective ways to motivate students:

- ***Make curriculum interesting.*** Survey students to determine their interests and tie in with lessons when possible. Good teachers often move around the classroom; vary the rate, pitch, and intensity of their voices; use colorful examples; and make creative use of computer and audiovisual resources.
- ***Demonstrate enthusiasm.*** Describe the upcoming activity in ways that "sell"; for example, "We're going to read a fascinating story today."
- ***Present information with intensity.*** Students will know clearly that the upcoming content is important.
- ***State learning objectives at the outset.*** This describes the "payoff" for student participation.
- ***Add variety and playfulness.*** One middle school teacher culminated a unit on Latin America by having students compete in a Jeopardy style game show. Students submitted 10 questions each from their research papers on different countries. Grades were given on the quality of their questions, not on their performance on "the show."
- ***Induce curiosity.*** A provocative or mysterious question on the board can get the lesson off to an invigorating start.

- ***Encourage student responses.*** Questions should be phrased to find out what students know, not what they don't know. Pausing longer after a question is asked will motivate students to give longer, more thoughtful responses. Teachers too often give too little time for students to think about their answers.
- ***Plan for success.*** Organize units or activities so that students have a high chance of success.
- ***Give positive reinforcement.*** List in advance positive behaviors you wish to reinforce as a reminder of things to look for. Give verbal and non-verbal feedback.
- ***Correct in a positive way.*** Focus on the behavior, not the person, emphasizing an intent to help the student grow.
- ***Encourage risk taking.*** Create a classroom climate where students feel comfortable expressing opinions. Communicate that, in many cases, there is no one "right answer."
- ***Make the abstract concrete, personal, or familiar.*** Sharing an anecdote can give students something specific to identify with. One Holland, Michigan, teacher, for example, pointed to similarities in climate and the potential for flower raising and dairy farming as reasons Dutch settlers were drawn to their local area. Another teacher pointed out that Greek slaves were often children "your age or younger."

Beyond the school day.

Another way to engage students is through opportunities for success and interesting experiences that are outside the classroom, but connected to school. Such opportunities have traditionally been available through extracurricular activities, such as drama, sports, music, and clubs. In addition to giving students a positive connection to school, extracurricular activities can give students practice in problem solving and critical thinking and provide a practical and interesting way for students to apply their skills and talents.

Community service is another dynamic way to improve student attitudes and engagement. Through its work with 24 schools in Los Angeles, the Constitutional Rights Foundation has found many benefits to involving youth in their communities. Students from all socioeconomic groups are often on the receiving end of help, which doesn't do much for their self-esteem, says Jennifer Appleton, program associate. "Until they realize they can be empowered to make a change in their own life and someone else's, they don't feel like they can make a difference."

The foundation's Youth Community Service Program works through teacher sponsors who meet weekly with the students, often over lunch. Students are trained to analyze their community for things they like and don't like and then plan a service project around a social issue, such as homelessness, the aging, or the environment.

If the project is to paint over graffiti, students are encouraged to write the paint companies and local agencies for donations, then organize additional students to carry out the project. "We've seen case after case of students starting to achieve much more fully socially, academically, and within their

own family," Appleton says. "It's amazing how kids begin to tie in what their family means to them."

A senior at Franklin High School in Los Angeles, a Hispanic teen, provides a good example. Let's call her Amalia. While she was a bright student, she "drifted along," because no one had encouraged her to set goals beyond high school. After two years in the Youth Service Program, Amalia organized service projects at her little brother's school; spoke before large audiences on behalf of the foundation, and began to apply to a number of colleges.

While the foundation's program is quite extensive, principals and teachers in all sizes and types of schools can organize similar efforts by looking at how social issues can be integrated into regular classroom activities. For example, one typing class raised funds to buy portable tape recorders, then visited a convalescent home where they taped "talking letters" from senior citizens who could no longer write their friends. The students returned to class and typed the letters for their new elderly friends. The project gave a "real world" opportunity to practice typing, enabled young people to develop a relationship with senior citizens, and gave the students a feeling of accomplishment and a greater sense of their own efficacy.

School systems across the country, from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to Atlanta, Georgia, are realizing the value of youth service for students, so they are making it a mandatory requirement of graduation. In Bethlehem, for example, graduates of the city's two high schools must have completed 60 hours, or about 15 minutes a week, of service to their community.

"I'm excited about this. It seems to work. It helps kids understand why school is relevant to life, and it helps some of them find an area in which they can be successful...Once you're successful in one phase of your life, you start doing better at other things like math and English."

—John Brisco, director, PennServe

Community service, however, isn't seen as something just for high school students. In the Elizabethtown Area, Pennsylvania, schools, for example, the community service program for elementary and middle school students is tied to the concepts taught at each grade level. Elementary grade-level themes are: Kindergarten—community beautification; Grades 1 and 2—caring and sharing; Grade 3—community; Grade 4—environment; Grade 5—citizenship. All seventh-graders participate in a project of reading children's books on cassette tapes for use in the Elizabethtown Public Library and in the school district elementary school libraries.

There are many practical, proven ways to rekindle the interest in learning that once flickered in every "kid in the middle." But many of these strategies require teachers to approach their jobs in new ways, using skills they were never taught in college and techniques they may be uncomfortable with at first. Change, if it is to be successful, requires staff development support and a commitment from teachers who must feel they have a stake in making it happen.

Resource

Youth Service America exists to help make service a universal experience among America's youth of all backgrounds. In addition to serving as an advocate for the national promotion of youth service, it provides technical assistance to existing and emerging youth programs. For information, contact Youth Service America, 810 18th Street, N.W., Suite 705, Washington, DC 20006; 202/783-8855.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT CHANGES NEEDED

What do teachers need to be more effective in reaching students in the middle? Ask most teachers and they'll provide the answer: more training in active learning techniques. While some might resist, the lion's share of teachers are distressed that more able students are not performing to their potential and they want to do something about it.

Involving teachers.

Teachers, administrators, staff development experts, and education reformers agree on at least one thing—that teachers need to be more involved in reform and in identifying their professional development needs in conjunction with needed changes. Said one principal: "I see teacher involvement as absolutely critical." Unless teachers are involved, he remarked, "any plan might look good on paper, but real change won't happen in the classroom.... Teachers must be the source of the changes."

In a study of schools that have successfully implemented the Paideia program, a common trait was that the staff development is designed in conjunction with staff members. "Teachers need to develop the training program, not only for ownership," says Patricia Weiss of the National Paideia Center, "but so the training fits actual needs." True reform comes not by installing a recipe, she adds, but through "changes of attitude and the process of education."

What teachers need.

To help average students, teachers need training on how to:

- Meet individual needs, such as through learning styles.
- Engage students as active participants in class.
- Give constructive feedback and encouragement.
- Solve problems that arise from using new techniques.
- Personalize education.
- Use alternative assessments in the classroom.

In addition to training, teachers need planning time to incorporate new ideas in their lessons and an opportunity to practice and get feedback. This follow-up is critical, experts note, because individuals remember only a small portion of what they hear in a workshop and must actually practice using a technique before they are comfortable enough to incorporate it regularly in the classroom.

When trying something new, teachers need reinforcement that is specific, or it isn't useful, says Marilyn Bates of the Staff Development Institute. Principals need to understand the stages of acquisition and be familiar with the content of workshops in order to provide the positive reinforcement that will increase the likelihood that the new strategy becomes a permanent part of the teacher's repertoire.

Purposes of staff development.

Not all staff development is intended to develop new skills. At critical times of the year, such as the start of school or a "cabin-fever" period in mid-winter, the most important need may be to inspire and motivate teachers to do their best. Bates identifies these six distinct purposes for training:

- ***Inspirational***. Speaker or activity that makes staff feel worthwhile or part of a team.
- ***Enrichment.*** Providing teachers an opportunity for growth with information and skills over and above the job description.
- ***Maintenance***. Workshops to help teachers keep their skills current.
- ***Remediation.*** To help teachers improve substandard skills.
- ***New employees.*** Information to welcome and orient to the district.
- ***Emerging needs.*** Respond to changes in the school or district.

Sweeping changes might be needed to effectively serve students in the middle. Most will be changes in thinking and in the core curriculum and how it's presented. Some might involve organizational change. All will require similar training for teachers and administrators to ensure they'll be operating from a common base of knowledge and experience. In some cases, new priorities might have to be set, along with a redeployment of resources. In other cases, schools and districts might have to go to the board and community for additional resources to get the job done.

Phasing teacher training.

The first priority in training might be to help teachers serve more effectively as advisors to students and their parents. A second might be training in "authentic" or "performance-based" assessment to make it possible for teachers to get better information about actual achievement and pinpoint the type of help students actually need. A plethora of other training might follow ranging from listening skills and motivation techniques to child development, cultural differences, and the use of technology in instruction.

Whatever training is offered, it should fit the needs of teachers and their students. Administrators should be sure the newfound knowledge and skills are applied in the classroom and in other relationships with students. Teachers should have an opportunity to share their experiences and receive the same kind of counsel, coaching, and support they are expected to provide students in the middle. They need to know that parents, administrators, school board members, and their community are behind them as they strive to respond to the unique education needs of an even greater variety of students.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Most everyone agrees that parents are a child's first and most important teacher. We understand that only a part of a student's learning takes place inside the classroom. What happens in the home and community can either reinforce or diminish the effectiveness of formal education.

What can parents do? They can make sure their child attends school regularly, become aware of what the student is learning in school, and provide learning experiences in the community and through travel and discussion. Even more basic is the need for parents to build a student's self-confidence, instill self-discipline, ensure good nutrition, and look out for the child's health needs. When parents can't do these things, it's important that a "significant other" step in and help.

Involving parents.

Most will also agree that parents should be involved in school. How can schools actually entice parents to become more involved? Here are some suggestions:

- ***Model a classroom technique,*** such as a seminar, using a topic of high interest for parents.
- ***Have teachers call parents*** early in the year—especially parents of those students likely to have problems—to make a positive comment about the child; the parent is more likely to be an ally than an opponent when and if trouble arises.
- ***Take tangible actions to make parents feel welcome,*** through signs or a special room for their use.
- ***Treat all parents with respect.***

- ***Make involvement meaningful.*** For a summer course on European history, for example, high schools in Manchester, Missouri, and St. Louis recruited attorney-parents to serve as judges at mock trials for figures in the French revolution. "Because it was an outsider, and a real attorney, the classroom crackled," says Ted Sizer. "Those parents had to see the school in a different way, because of that experience."
- ***Offer services that benefit parents.*** Local community colleges and elementary schools, for example, might use federal adult basic education funds to provide free literacy classes for parents at the school sites.
- ***Ease access between parents and teachers.*** Des Moines, Iowa, public schools has phones in every classroom, making it easier for teachers and working parents to receive and return phone calls. Some schools have teachers and administrators make at least one phone call a week to a parent or guardian to report on progress and to ask how they can be even more helpful. Those who do it say it pays dividends.

Some schools, such as in Chattenooga, Tennessee, believe parent involvement is so critical to a student's success that they have made it a requirement of attendance. The Chattenooga School of the Arts, which admits students through an application process, asks parents to volunteer two hours a month. While getting parents to volunteer might not be possible, especially with more parents working, it's never been more important for parents to be an ally in helping the "kids in the middle" be more engaged in their learning.

What To Tell Parents: How They Can Help At Home

1. **Discover your child's learning style.** One may want privacy to write a paper, while another may need to "talk through" the subject before getting started.
2. **Be goal-oriented.** Get your children to dream of a better future.
3. **Stress importance of homework.** Provide a lighted, comfortable space for homework and be sure it has priority. Homework should take precedence over television and telephone calls.
4. **Don't tolerate absences and tardiness.** It's difficult to teach students who aren't at school.
5. **Help children learn from their mistakes.** Focus on the positive and go forward.
6. **Find each child's special gifts** and use them as a basis for success.
7. **Teach with television.** Help your child watch a program with a discriminating eye, anticipating plot changes or contrasting characters.

Breaking the Ice with Parents

Chicago's Goldblatt Elementary School doesn't fit the stereotype of an inner city school in a low socioeconomic area. Parents are highly visible, volunteering in the computer lab, helping with discipline in the lunchroom, and working in their very own arts and crafts room, making things for the children.

"Having the parents is fantastic," says principal Lillian Nash. They're not just coming when there's a problem, and their presence has a noticeable effect on the children. "It has cut down tremendously on suspensions," she adds.

When Nash arrived at Goldblatt in 1989, the school had been using the Paideia approach for seven years, but test scores remained distressingly low. Nash decided to give priority attention to goal 5 in the school's improvement plan: getting parents involved to make sure they knew the children had homework and understood the purpose and importance of the Socratic seminars.

The school sponsored an evening program inspired by the PBS series on the civil rights movement, "Eyes on the Prize." The Socratic seminar was based on a key event—the death of Black Panther Fred Hampton—which happened on the West side of Chicago where they lived. Dinner was served afterward. The event drew 50 parents, about 10 times more than typically came to such meetings. "It was of high interest because they lived through it," Nash explains.

"That broke the ice," notes Nash. Parents are invited to come on Wednesdays to observe their child's seminar and they are welcome to drop in anytime in the Parents Room to work on a structured activity or to just relax.

TESTING THE MIDDLE KIDS

Most school reformers are taking a broader look at measuring student progress and learning because of the many problems inherent with short-answer and multiple choice tests. Instead, they are exploring ways for students to demonstrate proficiencies through "performances" and "exhibitions."

While some subjects, such as tennis or drama class, have always used performance measures, educators are expanding the concept to academic subjects, such as requiring students to complete more writing assignments. Some schools collect student writing samples in portfolios. These serve as a tangible record of student skills, a vehicle to guide students in evaluating their own skills, and a motivator as they see growth in their writing over time.

Fourth-grade science students in New York state are required to collect data and form conclusions about an unknown object, such as a powdered chemical. The assessment, while using inexpensive materials, measures deep concepts. "Instead of supplanting classroom time," which happens in most standardized assessments, "the activities should be integrated into quality teaching," says Ramsay Selden of the Council of Chief State School Officers' State Assessment Center. Such "real world" assessments are also inherently more interesting than a paper-and-pencil test.

Test as learning tool.

Good assessments can serve as both diagnostic tools and learning experiences, says researcher Arthur Powell. In math, for example, the student should demonstrate the process used so the teacher can diagnose why the student obtained an incorrect answer. The test can teach by giving students a chance to apply information in a new situation or to put together what was learned in a new way. "Ideally," Powell says, "there should be almost an 'a-ha, I understand something new that I didn't know before,' or 'I can do something new that I couldn't do before.'"

Learning something new at test time is what happens at Parkway South High School in Manchester, Missouri, where students demonstrate what they know in classroom exhibitions instead of on tests. "Everybody has a different viewpoint on things, says student Tammy Bateman. "If you listen to what everyone in the class thinks, you have to come up with your own view." Too, she says, classroom exhibitions are more fair to students. "People have different ways of thinking....On a test, you have to be thinking the way the teacher is thinking, even down to how she words the question. If you happen to be thinking from another perspective, that's your problem. A presentation gives you the chance to show how you interpret facts."

"On a test, you can get socked with some little detail you might have had three months ago and then do badly on the test. In a presentation, you can show what you do know."

—Twelfth-grade student
Parkway South High School
Manchester, Mo.

Many schools are moving toward greater use of criterion-referenced tests. These tests measure a student's mastery of specific skills rather than simply ranking students along a continuum or comparing their performance to a national norm.

Multiple measures.

Teachers and schools should use multiple measures for evaluating students because there are drawbacks to all methods, says national education consultant Faith Hamre. "If we only use our own perception in judging the capability of a child, we leave many children out. Hamre says. "Usually, it's those children who learn differently than we do." A teacher may "peg" a child as "non-attendant" (unable to stay on task) because of differences in learning styles.

Standardized tests can counterbalance teacher perceptions by providing an objective outside measure, but they should not be used with very young children. "The standard error of measure on standardized tests for kindergarten and first grade can vary by as much as two years," Hamre says. "Teachers make grave decisions about a child on a test that gives tremendous flexibility." Hamre recommends not using standardized tests until at least second grade. High stakes testing is a growing concern among both educators and parents.

Inaccurate testing information can be mitigated, she adds, if a teacher's informal observations of a child's performance are incorporated into the child's permanent record. Standardized forms can be developed that are not burdensome for teachers and that provide at-a-glance information to others, such as the teacher having the child the following year.

Hamre recommends a three-pronged system: standardized tests, informal everyday observations by the classroom teacher, and formal teacher observations based on predetermined criteria. A formal observation for a middle or high school class, for example, might divide students into groups and ask them to discuss something they have read. The teacher tells the class in advance the three or four criteria to be used in evaluation. While the students discuss, the teacher circulates, looking for:

- Contributions of each member.
- Clarity with which a student presents a problem.
- Clarity with which students present multiple solutions and select a solution.
- Creativity in presenting alternatives.

Formal classroom observations allow a teacher to see how students actually use the information they have, Hamre concludes.

Broadening the types of assessment used can better serve the needs of "kids in the middle" by making classroom evaluations more interesting and by providing teachers with more accurate measures of students' knowledge and abilities. The best testing and assessment yields results that can be used directly in improving education for each student.

NEXT STEPS

It is clear that many things need to change in American education before all children are truly challenged to meet their potential. In schools where education seems most vital, teachers and administrators have changed the way classes are taught, the way curriculum is viewed and, in many cases, how schools are organized.

Getting started.

Where should schools begin? Most reformers agree that meaningful change is most likely to occur when those on the "front lines"—teachers and other interested staff—play an integral role in decision making. Members of the Coalition for Essential Schools do not follow a rigid formula, but instead chart their own courses guided by a set of nine common principles:

- Student-as-worker
- Staff-as-generalists
- Diploma-by-exhibition
- Personalizing education
- Budget for a 1:80 staff-student ratio
- Universal goals for all students
- An intellectual focus
- Simple goals
- Attitude of high expectations without threats.

"Every good school I've been in has 'senators' on the faculty who are generally respected by all," says Ted Sizer. "If the senators set the standard or expectation, it tends to rub off." Such role models can be positive or negative. Sizer recommends that principals identify potential senators "and try to get them to join your parade. In many schools that's very difficult; in other schools it works."

One idea vs. overhaul.

Can any of the reforms be effectively employed separately? Patricia Weiss of the Paideia Program says yes. Many individual teachers have learned

Paideia principles at a conference and have effectively used the Socratic seminar in their own classroom. Success is contagious, and often other teachers will see the value of the new technique and want to learn more. It is better to start somewhere than not to start at all, she reasons.

On the other hand, Dave Mittleholtz of San Diego speaks of the role of central administration support in the spectacular achievement gains of low-scoring schools in the Achievement Goals Program. The program employed multiple strategies all at once to make a difference.

"You have to do it (reform) all at once," says Sizer. "That is why these Essential Schools are so damnably difficult. As soon as you take any bold step, it affects everything else. To reduce pupil-teacher ratios, you have to change the curriculum and the schedule. To insist that students do the work—give them questions, not answers—slows everything down."

"Piecemeal reform doesn't work. We have 25 years of experience with that," Sizer insists. "The alternative is pretty ghastly to contemplate. This is the only way it is going to succeed." Otherwise teachers will try to change the pedagogy to student-as-worker, but we'll still give them 145 kids and 47-minute periods. "It becomes very frustrating for teachers."

Role at the top.

How can superintendents and school board members better help "the kids in the middle?" Support for reform from the district level is crucial. Superintendents and board members can help most by encouraging schools to set their own character and be attentive to their communities. An effective superintendent practices "management by walking around," visiting schools as often as possible to listen. Likewise, principals should be out of their office and into the classrooms on a regular basis. "The implication is that key decisions are made by those closest to the children," Sizer explains.

To board members, Sizer pleads, "Get rid of the conception of the average student. The categorization of kids is just a plague. We put youngsters in little boxes, but we misplace a lot of them. And we aren't very clear about what our boxes are in the first place."

With all the competing demands upon schools by the courts, by special interest groups, and by pressing academic and social needs, it is easy to understand how the "kids in the middle" may have been overlooked in American education. These students do not call attention to themselves by dropping out or misbehaving, or by excelling in academics, the arts, or sports.

The good news is that models abound for reenergizing education for kids in the middle. Most of the strategies described in this booklet can be tried in any school or district. The need is clear and the means are available to more effectively serve the kids in the middle. The time to begin is now. We can't afford to wait.

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RESOURCES

Coalition of Essential Schools
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Effective School Consortia Network
BOCES III
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National Paideia Center
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Staff Development Institute
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